The Hidden History of the Formosa Crisis

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The Inner Politics of A False Alarm

I

What Threat to Formosa?

An extraordinary admission was made by Senator George in a little noticed radio interview over MBS last Monday night. The Senator was asked whether he thought Communist China was bluffing. He replied that he did not think China was bluffing "in the ordinary sense of the term." "But," he added, "in point of timing it may be several years off before they would actually begin an operation looking to the, as they say, liberation of the Formosan people."

The time and the source made this startling. It was just two weeks after the President in an emergency message had asked authority not only to defend Formosa but to strike in advance of hostilities—and even with nuclear weapons—against any buildup on the mainland which seemed to foreshadow an attack upon it. The request for this approval in advance was rushed through Congress with the urgency of a declaration of war. The country and the world were whipped into a state of near hysteria by a move which seemed justifiable, if at all, only on secret information that Peiping was on the verge of unleashing an attack. This was indeed the impression created by the secret briefings which were given the Congressional committees concerned by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of State. Members of these committees hinted on the floor of both House and Senate that revelations were made which explained the need for swift warning to Peiping. Only so, we were told, could we avoid World War III.

Yet here two weeks later was Senator George, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who had heard all the secret briefings, the most respected and the most powerful member of Congress on matters of foreign policy, the confidant of Admiral Radford and Secretary Dulles, the Senator who did more than any other single man to put the Formosan resolution through an unconvinced and worried Senate over the misgivings of some of his closest colleagues, and he was saying "in point of timing it," i.e. an attack on Formosa, "may be several years off!"

An Advance at Snail's Pace

Were it not for the deafening barrage of war scare headlines since the President's Formosan message, this admission by Senator George would have been less surprising. A minute and patient examination of the dispatches would have thrown doubt on the urgent alarms. Walter Simmons, the *Chicago Tribune's* correspondent on Formosa, had spelled out the snail's pace of the Chinese Communist island-hopping advance in its issue of February 2. Simmons pointed out that the steep mountainous beaches of Fukien province opposite Formosa made it "militarily useless," that any attack on the island (or from the island on the mainland) must utilize the Shanghai region 400 miles to the north. The rocky Tachens cover the approaches to this area.

Simmons reported that the Communists had opened their campaign against the Tachens last May by taking the Kao Taos isles, 20 miles to the north. A month later they took Toumen island, five miles closer. At this point they stopped to build up air support for their next step, the assault on Yikiang island, eight miles from upper Tachen. This was captured on January 18, and put the Communists in position for their next move, which was an attack on Upper Tachen island. A drive against Formosa itself, 200 miles to the south, was "probably," Simmons cabled, "many months in the future."

This explains a remark few newspapers reported which was made by Secretary Dulles the day Yikiang fell. That was the day the Secretary, after talking with the White House, dismissed the loss of the island as "without any particular importance." Mr. Dulles told his press conference Yikiang was "part of a group of islands most of which actually passed from Nationalist to Communist hands last May." He added, "The loss didn't attract any particular attention at that time. Since then," the Secretary continued, "public opinion has been focussed more on these little off-shore islands than was the case last May." This was the day before the President at his own press conference wrote off the Tachens altogether.

No Sign of Impending Attack

This was the attitude taken by the Administration before it decided to ring the alarm bells and send its war message to Congress. But even after the message there were indications from informed sources which deflated the notion of a military emergency. John G. Norris, who covers the Pentagon for the *Washington Post*, reported on January 26, two days after the President's message, "military men don't look for an immediate assault on the Tachens." He added, "most military men at the Pentagon believe the Reds will move a step at a time, and that they are nowhere near ready for an assault on Quemoy, much less Formosa itself." The *New York Times* next day published a dispatch from Greg MacGregor on Formosa saying, "Ships and aircraft patrolling Formosa strait reported today they had not detected a Communist vessel build-up indicating any immediate invasion of any Nationalist-held island."

Land cannot be taken by air. Even with the latest military technology, we had to use the lowly LST to land troops in Normandy. MacGregor said "a vast concentration of junks and sampans" easily spotted by reconnaissance "must necessarily precede any attempt by the Reds to take islands held by any sizeable number of Nationalist troops." As for an

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invasion of Formosa and the Pescadores, MacGregor reported this would require "a fleet of more than 5,000, and possibly close to 10,000 of these small craft . . . but even with this huge armada the Reds would have only the slimmest chance to land an appreciable percentage of troops, naval men believe." The Washington *Evening Star*, summing up the military picture on January 30, said "most American military men think nothing short of a modern invasion fleet could give Red China even a fighting chance to put a formidable force on Formosa's beaches."

Even General Chennault, who advocates war with China and who told reporters on Formosa February 1 "now is the time for decision," did not think Formosa in danger. He told Homer Bigart (New York *Herald Tribune*, Feb. 2) he thought Quemoy and Matsu would be the next Communist targets, to be followed by a shift southward to Indo-China. "He thought Formosa would be safe for the present," Bigart cabled. He quoted General Chennault as saying, "I don't see how they can take it. Formosa can be captured only by a massive operation, not by infiltration." Even Chennault's war-time aide and hero worshipper, Joseph Alsop, in a dispatch from Formosa published February 7 went no further than these rich and hollow phrases—"the slow but inexorable movement of all [Chinese Communist] forces southward also points to an *eventual* attack on Quemoy and the Matsus *and beyond much doubt* on the main island of Formosa." The italics are added to show that Alsop himself, the Cassandra of columnists, was unable to find an attack imminent.

II

The Fliers Are Forgotten

The President's sudden and alarming war powers message seems all the stranger when viewed against the background of what a few weeks before was supposed to be the main concern of the American government and people—the release of the fliers imprisoned as spies by Communist China. It was on their behalf that UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold had gone to Peiping, and when he returned on January 13 he made it clear that he did not consider his mission completed. The Ninth General Assembly, at the request of the U.S., had instructed the Secretary General to "make, by the means most appropriate in his judgment, continuing and unremitting efforts" to obtain the release of the fliers. He told the press on his return that he would determine his next step after conferring with the heads of the various UN delegations. "We hope to be able to continue our contact," Mr. Hammarskjold said of his visit with Chou En-lai. "The door that has been opened can be kept open, given restraint on both sides."

This feeling seems to have been shared in Peiping. *The Times of India*, which had its own correspondent in Peiping for the Chou-Hammarskjold talks, carried a revealing dispatch from the Communist capital in its issue of January 17. The dispatch reported that Peiping was pleased with Hammarskjold's visit, that the release of the American fliers was expected when the atmosphere improves, and that "The note of restraint in President Eisenhower's statement in Washington has not escaped notice here."

"Contacts between the UN Secretary General and Peiping are expected to be resumed later," the dispatch continued, "during the ensuing week when Mr. Hammarskjold will have completed his round of consultations with the chief delegates of the various UN member countries, which he is expected to conclude in the next two days."

The first fruit of these better relations came on Friday, January 21, when simultaneously in Peiping and at United Nations headquarters in New York it was announced that the Chinese Communist government was inviting the families of the imprisoned fliers to visit the men in China. "United Nations sources," the *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent at the UN wrote that day, "said Mr. Chou made the offer in response to Mr. Hammarskjold's expressions of concern for the well-being of the imprisoned men" and "One experienced diplomat in close touch with the Hammarskjold mission said he could not conceive of Mr. Chou's making the move if he expected to keep the men in jail indefinitely."

Next day in its weekly "Washington Letter," the *Monitor* said Peiping was expected to free the fliers soon "without direct bargaining, in the course of a few weeks." The price, according to this report, was simply "that the United States do nothing to push matters or make new demands, through the United Nations or otherwise. Oriental 'face' requires that Communist China seem to act voluntarily. If Washington were to allow certain detained Chinese students to return to Communist China," the report continued, "that would be welcomed, but it is not demanded by Peiping."

The State Department's reaction must have come as a surprise to Hammarskjold. Instead of hailing this as a victory in the campaign for the release of the fliers, the Department warned the families that in response to this "ostensibly humanitarian offer" they would be going into an area where "the normal protections of an American passport cannot be offered." The invitation was made to seem sinister by the press officers of both the Department and the Air Force. Mr. Hammarskjold at once issued a statement saying he had "no doubt about [their] safety" and at UN headquarters "it was understood that if the United States would not issue passports valid for travel on the China mainland, the UN itself would offer the families official diplomatic *laissez-passers*, thus throwing the UN's mantle of protection over them." (*Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 22).

The State Department seemed afraid that good-will would be created toward Communist China by the visit, especially if the families were allowed to bring the men back with them. The campaign for the release of the fliers was shut off and the President's war powers message gave the Department a reason to refuse passports for such a visit.

The manner and timing of this refusal were significant. On January 27, John Kiba, an Akron, Ohio, foreman, visited the United Nations headquarters. He wanted to take advantage of the invitation to see his brother, one of the imprisoned fliers. He spoke with Andrew W. Cordier, executive assistant to Hammarskjold, and with Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the U.S. representative to the UN. Afterwards he held a press conference. According to the *New York Times* next day (Jan. 28), Cordier "was reported to have told one of the prisoners' relatives that 'a definite link' might exist between the visits of the families and possible Communist action to free the men quickly." Mr. Lodge, according to the *New York Times*, "promised he would do all he could to help once the State Department had given clearance."

Chiang Predicted War in 1955

"Taipeh, Jan. 1 (AP)—Chiang Kai-shek Friday declared the Red attacks on Nationalist offshore islands were 'the overture to the battle of Taiwan (Formosa) strait.'

"'A full-scale war may break out at any time,' Chiang declared in a New Year's statement to the people.

"Chiang spoke after conferences with Admiral Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is here for a series of meetings, presumably on the defense of Formosa."

—*Associated Press dispatch, read to the Senate by Morse, Jan. 28, Con. Rec., 808.*

Lecture Note: IFS speaks next Friday night in Regina, Saskatchewan; Sunday night, the 20th, in Winnipeg; and Monday the 21st in Gary, Indiana, at 445 Adams St. Watch for announcement of a special get-together with New York readers on March 4.

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Washington Slams The Door

Apparently neither UN headquarters nor our UN representative had been kept informed of what was going on. For that very night the State Department in Washington released the text of a letter by Mr. Dulles to relatives of the imprisoned men. The Department said the text was being released "when it had reason to believe" the families had already received their copies. Mr. Dulles said that because of the "increasingly belligerent attitude of China" passports for such a visit would be denied. Apparently Mr. Kiba had not received his copy, and Mr. Lodge had not been consulted, though the letter said this action was being taken "only after careful deliberation." And when Henry Suydam, the Department's press officer, an able and very knowledgable gentleman, was asked that night whether Secretary General Hammarskjold had been informed or consulted, he replied "Not that I am aware of."

Few newspapers reported, none so far as I know commented on, the discourteous if not studied indifference of this reply. The Secretary General had gone to Peiping on behalf of the fliers. He had persuaded the Chinese to permit their relatives to visit them. Such a visit opened the possibility that the fliers might be allowed to go home with them. His reward was to have the door slammed shut by Washington without consulting or informing him although he was still working on the delicate task of freeing the fliers. This was a strange way to treat an international official engaged in a mission of mercy on one's behalf.

The invitation was a good-will offering. It implied that the men could hardly be guilty of any very heinous crime. One does not invite relatives to come visit dangerous spies and criminals. If Peiping chose to make it, the stage was set for a dramatic gesture. To let the men go home with their relatives, after being treated well in Communist China, would have broken the ice of the American press and won Peiping that good-will it so badly needs in this country for ultimate admission to the UN. Is that what the State Department feared? The release of the letter came too late that night for official UN reaction but the *New York Times* reported there would be disappointment because "one prevailing view here" i.e. at UN headquarters, "has been that acceptance of the offer might go far to speed the men's release." Did Mr. Dulles have tongue in cheek when he wrote in his letter to the relatives of the fliers, "In the best interest of peace, we do not think it prudent to afford the Chinese Communists further opportunities to provoke our nation and strain its patience further?"

III

The Key to the Mystery

Since there was no immediate threat to Formosa and the Pescadores, and the UN's escorts for the release of the fliers were still going on with some promise of success, why did the Administration suddenly change its tune and rush a war-like message to Congress? Up to and including his press conference of Wednesday, January 19, the President (like Mr. Hammarskjold) had counselled restraint and patience. Two days later, on Friday, January 21, Congressional leaders were summoned to the White House to be briefed by Admiral Radford and Secretary Dulles on a quite different course of action. The threat of preventive war marked a sharp turn of policy, and was calculated to upset the delicate negotiations behind the scenes.

In this respect, it bore a striking resemblance to the Radford-Dulles plan last Spring. The Admiral and the Secretary of State saw Sir Anthony Eden on the eve of the Geneva conference. Their plan was for U.S. air and naval units to strike at the besiegers of Dienbienphu. They said the President was prepared to go to Congress on the following Monday, April 26—the very day the Geneva conference was to open—and in a special message ask authority for military intervention. (See the story as spelled out by Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post* in *The Reporter* last September 14.) Had the British and French agreed, the Geneva conference—a conference Mr. Dulles opposed—would have been doomed. There would have been no peaceful settlement in Indo-China. There would have been another Korea, perhaps another Chinese intervention, possibly a wider war.

The Threat of Peace

The threat then was the threat of a peaceful settlement which would enhance the prestige of Communist China. I believe the key to the mystery of the current crisis is the same. The threat was not the threat of a military attack. The only threats were verbal—and political. The danger was that the behind scenes negotiations might succeed (1) in bringing about a *de facto* cease-fire in the Formosa straits and (2) in obtaining the release of the American fliers. The ensuing relaxation of tension would not accord with the aims of the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Secretary of State has never really given up his belief in "liberation" nor in "massive retaliation," whatever the President's views on co-existence. He was allied with Radford again last September in advocating the bombing of the Chinese mainland in defense of Quemoy.

Why did the President suddenly change his mind this time and go along with the Radford-Dulles plan? One can only surmise. No doubt domestic politics played their part—the desire to placate the Knowland wing of the Republican party, and to prevent an open break. But this factor of domestic politics by itself is not enough to explain so crucial a shift. It represented only one of the pressures brought to bear upon the Presidency. The decisive factor, I believe, was simply the long-time ambition of the American armed services to keep Formosa as a military base. On the eve of the Korean war, when the military assumed Chiang could not last much longer, they were casting about for some way to take over the island

Attlee and Bevan Agree in Regarding Formosa as Chinese

"MR. ATTLEE. It is, of course, clear that in this matter of Formosa and the islands there is an intervention in a civil war. (*Opposition cheers*). It is clearly an action by the United States and not the United Nations. (*Renewed opposition cheers*). But in view of the need for preventing hostilities and trying to get some peaceful arrangement, is it not clear that the right thing would be that China should occupy her proper position in the United Nations? (*Loud opposition cheers*).

"SIR A. EDEN. I must say I am surprised that Mr. Attlee should couple Formosa with the offshore islands—(*Opposition cries of 'Why?'*)—because he must surely be aware the islands have always been treated as separate areas . . . Formosa in this century has never been a part of China . . .

"MR. ATTLEE. The Foreign Secretary has left out some history. It is quite true that Formosa was seized from China by an act of aggression of Japan: it is equally true that at the end of the war Formosa was declared to be an integral part of China, and no one stated that more clearly than Chiang Kai-shek. The fact that he has been put out in favor of another Government does not alter that fact . . .

"MR. ANEURIN BEVAN (Ebbw Vale, Lab.). The Foreign Secretary stated that the position of Formosa was much different from that of the offshore islands. This has been described in the United States as a sort of jurisdictional line. We have not been able to understand that situation at all because it has always been understood that Formosa, equally with the offshore islands, belongs to the mainland of China. Does he now suggest that the situation has been altered by virtue of the fact that Formosa was stolen from China in 1896? Is it now an interpretation of international law that if you steal property from a thief you can hold it?"

—*House of Commons, January 27.*

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via a UN trusteeship or some similar device. They are again prepared to write off Chiang. The logic of events and the status quo persuade acquiescence in "two Chinas." Where the belligerent military and the more cautious agree is in the desire to keep Formosa. Successful cease-fire negotiations and better relations with Peiping threatened our hold on Formosa.

The Minima and Maxima of Cease-Fire

Negotiations have been underway since last September. Though the details are still withheld, several things are clear. The first is that no cease-fire could be expected until Peiping had recovered the offshore islands from which Chiang, the American military and CIA have been carrying on intelligence and sabotage activities against the mainland. With the offshore islands in its hands, the situation would become tolerable for Peiping.

The second point which became clear was that Peiping could not be expected ever publicly and formally to give up its claim to Formosa. This is a question on which the Chinese—whether they follow Mao, Chiang or anyone else—are united. But that does not mean that Peiping might not acquiesce in foreign occupation for some time, so long as the island were not a base for counter-revolutionary activity against it.

Was there a possibility of such an unspoken agreement? Last week I quoted indications of just such a solution in two off-the-record statements made to Thomas J. Hamilton, the chief correspondent of the *New York Times* at the United Nations after the Chou-Hammarskjold conversations (Jan. 13 and City Edition of Jan. 14). The same impression was given to William R. Frye, the *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent at the UN. In that paper on January 19, Mr. Frye reported, "Communist China, for its part, did not tell Mr. Hammarskjold directly whether it would consider a compromise settlement which would leave Formosa outside its jurisdiction. Mr. Chou is understood to have said he would not abandon his 'claim' to Formosa, leaving the inference that under some conditions he might abandon his active efforts to seize it."

But such a solution is possible only if no explicit renunciation of Formosa is required. As the London *Times* said in a leading editorial on January 25, the day after the President's war powers message, it may be possible for "two Chinas" to exist in fact "but if any degree of formal settlement is sought between them each must deny the right of the other to exist." Because of the delicacy of the situation, the *Times* therefore thought it would be "more profitable to pursue the private diplomatic channels that have been opened as a result of Mr. Hammarskjold's visit to Peking." The *Times* thought it possible to achieve a cease-fire but said "it would be folly to suppose that Peking would ever publicly and explicitly reconcile itself to such a prospect."

Those Submarines Again

"With the U.S. 7th Fleet Off Formosa, Feb. 5 (UP)—American naval officers revealed today that 'unidentified objects' presumed to be submarines apparently have been shadowing the U.S. 7th Fleet in Formosan waters. Their best guess was that the undersea craft were Russian."

—Most of the U.S. Press, Feb. 5 and 6.

From a survey of the military situation in the Formosan area by Mark S. Watson, most respected of Pentagon reporters, in the Baltimore *Sun*, Feb. 8: "It is understood that no non-American submarines have been detected in that vicinity for weeks."

Peiping seeks to keep the situation fluid, Washington to freeze it. Our Western allies see in the abondonment of the offshore islands the creation of a military situation which would make a tacit cease-fire easy to achieve. What Radford and Dulles sold Eisenhower was quite a different proposition —that we "swap" Quemoy and Matsu for explicit abandonment by Peiping of claim to Formosa. It is here that we come to the real difference between Washington and London.

Similarly the treaty with Chiang stimulated Peiping's belligerence in recent months. As Mr. Dulles told the Senate Foreign Relations committee last Monday, "when it was known that the United States intended to negotiate this Treaty of Mutual Defense with the Republic of China, the Chinese Communists stepped up their anti-American activities. They announced their condemnation to imprisonment of United States fliers." Indeed, Mr. Dulles said, "that announcement coincided to the very day with the initialing of the Security Treaty by the Foreign Minister of the Republic of China and myself."

The treaty with Chiang, from Peiping's point of view, threatened permanently to freeze the situation in the Far East, to commit the U.S. to the support of Chiang, and by Article VII to give the U.S. military bases on the island. The purpose of the State Department and the Pentagon in rushing the mutual security pact with Chiang to completion last Fall was to establish some semblance of legal right to bases in Formosa before this could be lost in a new Geneva-style conference. As Mr. Dulles told the Senate committee last Friday in asking quick action on the treaty, its ratification "would provide firm reassurance . . . that Taiwan (Formosa) and the Pescadores are not a subject for barter as part of some Far Eastern 'deal' with the Chinese Communists." This is slick work. No wonder the *New York Times* reported (Jan. 31) that Knowland is now on the best of terms with the State Department and has been calling Mr. Dulles "boss."

Next Week: The Need for Alarm to Stampede the Senate

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